THE FABLE OF THE SHEEP, OR, PRIVATE VIRTUES, PUBLIC VICES: THE CONSUMER REVOLUTION OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

The root of evil, avarice.
That dam'd ill-natur'd baneful vice,
Was slave to prodigality,
That noble sin; whilst luxury
Employ'd a million of the poor,
And odious pride a million more:
Envy itself, and vanity,
Were masters of ministry;
Their darling folly, fickleness,
In diet, furniture, and dress,
That strange ridic'lous vice, was made
The very wheel that turn'd the trade.

Bernard Mandeville, *The Grumbling Hive: or, The Knaves Turn'd Honest* (1705)

Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, within which the above poem was incorporated in 1714, is commonly used by eighteenth-century historians to highlight the debates over luxury and the emergence of political economy.[1] Mandeville shared the disdain of his contemporaries in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* for shopping, fashion and 'avarice' — especially that which was indulged in by women — though he recognized that conspicuous consumption fuelled the economy and led to greater national wealth, shared by all.[2] By the end of the century, Mandeville's 'publick benefits' had become public virtues. Economists such as Adam Smith, recognizing that 'con-

* For comments on earlier drafts of this article I would especially like to thank Lawrence Black, Martin Daunton and Margot Finn, as well as the participants at the Economic History Society conference in Glasgow, the History and Consumption conference, University of Sussex (both March 2001), the History Seminar, University of Warwick and the Consumption Seminar in the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology, University of Birmingham (both October 2001).

[1] Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714; New York, 1962).

[2] *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from 'The Tatler' and 'The Spectator'*, ed. Erin Mackie (New York, 1998). On the luxury debates, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994); John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (London, 1977).

sumption is the sole end and purpose of all production', began to associate trade and commerce with order, progress, and the end of aristocratic feudalism.[3] While Smith remained uneasy about the desires for 'baubles and trinkets', elsewhere he shared with others a belief that the marketplace itself produced not chaos but 'polite, refined and cultured people', the sort of sociable men who were to be the main participants in the expanding bourgeois public sphere.[4]

This transformation of private vice into public virtue is central to histories of the eighteenth-century 'consumer revolution', the existence of which is now accorded the status of historical fact, though the discovery of its 'birth' is only relatively recent.[5] In this article I want to suggest that a similar consumer revolution took place in the twentieth century, though with a very different trajectory between vice and virtue. I will argue, to begin with, that in the immediate post-Second World War period consumption came to be celebrated as a private virtue. This is not merely to follow a familiar argument that affluence, reconstruction, and the celebration and propagation of the 'American dream' created a new mass consumer society in which the 'ethic' of private, individualized consumption triumphed over competing political ideologies. This was undoubtedly the case, but the organized consumer movement, spearheaded in Britain by the Consumers' Association and its magazine, *Which?*, promoted a type of consumption that served to bolster domesticity and family life, as well as celebrating a new notion of the consumer or 'supershopper' as rational, hyperefficient, and the basic atomistic unit of modern citizenship. While this modern consumerism easily dovetailed with classical economic models of consumption, this article will also demonstrate that it has done more than simply recreate the 'publick benefits' of increased national wealth. In the

[3] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; Chicago, 1976), ii, bk 4, ch. 8, 179; Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, 1996).

[4] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), p. xix; Joyce Appleby, 'Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); Neil de Marchi, 'Adam Smith's Accommodation of "Altogether Endless" Desires', in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850* (Manchester, 1999).

[5] Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982).

second half of the article, therefore, I will outline the public vices as identified by modern consumerism, first by detailing the political campaigning activities of the Consumers' Association, and then by outlining the philosophy of consumer-citizenship embedded in the National Consumer Council, set up in 1975. Here, I build on a frequent analysis found in critical theory: namely, that as consuming identities have eclipsed other social, cultural and economic identities, particularly those of a productivist mentality, material culture has become the basis through which knowledge about the world has been formed and politicized. This has led not only to a pursuit of value-for-money individual purchasing, but to the development of single-issue political campaigning which acted, and increasingly continues to do so, within a globalized marketplace, as the foremost 'countervailing power' or critique of the public sphere of the economy and state regulation.[6] If consumption has therefore become a private virtue, it has also become the means by which individuals organize collectively to check the abuses of what is variedly regarded as 'public vice'.

I

CONSUMPTION TYPOLOGIES

In order to understand the politicization of consumption, it is necessary to identify three types of commodity. The distinctions made between goods have usually employed familiar moral dichotomies. In the eighteenth century, the distinctions were between luxury and necessity, real and false. The evangelical and respectable conscience of the nineteenth century translated these terms into the use and abuse of improving organizations, into the rational and irrational, into moderation and excess — dichotomies central to liberal economics, morality and conceptions of gender relations. John Stuart Mill applied Adam Smith's notion of productive and unproductive labour to matters of consumption. Mill thus disliked pineapples and champagne, but did approve of work coats, the latter being productive as opposed to unproductive consumption.[7] Similarly, William Thompson desired more hearty

[6] The quoted phrase is from J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958; Harmondsworth, 1998).

[7] John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy, with Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, 2 vols. (1852; London, 1968), i, bk 1, 52. See also John Stuart Mill,

(cont. on p. 225)

bread instead of 'prancing horses and gay clothing', and Alfred Marshall preferred cabbage to green peas in the month of March, the former presumably representing 'solid, unostentatious pleasure of a wholesome kind'.[8] John Ruskin told consumers to develop the 'art of life' not 'illth', a concept defined in opposition to real wealth: 'the possession of the valuable by the valiant'.[9] And William Morris encouraged the purchase of items that led to 'useful work' rather than the alienating 'vulgarities and shabby gentilities' of the mass market.[10]

Such polarities have been crucial to the moralization of the market, and the subjective nature of the examples does not detract from their usefulness as categories of analysis. While precise definitions of exactly what constitutes the first type of good — a necessity — are difficult to find, it is undeniable that everyday household commodities have become important political symbols and rallying points for collective action. For instance, the politics of food prices lies at the heart of the struggles involved in the eighteenth-century 'moral economy' and in the symbolism of the Free Trade versus Protection debates.[11] The most consistent consumer politics of necessity developed through the Co-operative Movement's following the dividend system intro-

(n. 7 cont.)
'II: Of the Influence of Consumption on Production' and 'III: Of the Words Productive and Unproductive', in his *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* (London, 1992); Samuel Hollander, *The Economics of John Stuart Mill*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), i, 264–72.

[8] William Thompson, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness: Applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth* (London, 1824), 196–9; Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1890; London, 1961), 63–70, 83–91; David Reisman, *The Economics of Alfred Marshall* (London, 1986), 25–43; David Reisman, *Alfred Marshall's Mission* (Basingstoke, 1990).

[9] John Ruskin, *Unto this Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy* (1860–1; London, 1898), 125. See also John Ruskin, *Munera Pulveris: Six Essays on the Elements of Political Economy, 1862–63*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London, 1903–12), xvii.

[10] Noel Thompson, *The Market and its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1998), 163–7. See esp. William Morris, *How We Live and How We Might Live* (1885), *Useful Work and Useless Toil* (1884) and *News from Nowhere* (1890), all in *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs (1962; Harmondsworth, 1977).

[11] E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971); Adrian Randall and Adrian Charlesworth, *The Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (Basingstoke, 1999); Frank Trentmann, 'Wealth versus Welfare: The British Left between Free Trade and National Political Economy before the First World War', *Hist. Research*, lxx (1997).

duced by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844.[12] Basic provisioning was also central to formulations of the 'living wage' and the winning of certain social rights, which were so crucial to what T. H. Marshall would later describe as the third stage of citizenship.[13] As well as price, concern over necessities has also focused on quality, though the political issues involved in adulteration legislation and the Weights and Measures Acts have not always foregrounded the consumer interest.[14] In the early twentieth century, women played an active role in the rethinking of socialist consumer politics, and questions of daily provisioning for the 'woman with the basket' were central to the War Emergency Workers' National Committee and the Consumers' Council of the First World War.[15] If the Profiteering Acts failed to restrict big business in the inter-war period effectively, consumers' interests in essential foodstuffs were at least acknowledged in the Food Council (set up in 1925), in the Agricultural Marketing Acts of the early

[12] Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, c.1870–1930* (Manchester, 1996); Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (eds.), *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Co-operation in Europe, North America and Japan, 1840–1990* (Oxford, 1999).

[13] T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950). On the living wage, see Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, 1997).

[14] Michael French and Jim Phillips, *Cheated not Poisoned? Food Regulation in the United Kingdom, 1875–1938* (Manchester, 2000); Jim Phillips and Michael French, 'Adulteration and Food Law, 1899–1939', *Twentieth Century Brit. Hist.*, ix (1998).

[15] Karen Hunt, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of the Domestic: British Socialist Women and the Politics of Consumption', *Women's Hist. Rev.*, ix (2000); Matthew Hilton, 'The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Hist. Jl*, xlv (2002); J. M. Winter, *Socialism and the Challenge of War: Ideas and Politics in Britain, 1912–1918* (London, 1974), ch. 7; Bernard Waites, 'The Government of the Home Front and the "Moral Economy" of the Working Class', in P. H. Liddle (ed.), *Home Fires and Foreign Fields: British Social and Military Experience in the First World War* (London, 1985); War Emergency Workers' National Committee, *Report, August 1914 to March 1916* (London, 1916); W. H. Beveridge, *British Food Control* (London, 1928); H. W. Clemesha, *Food Control in the North-West Division* (Manchester, 1922); A. J. Philip, *Rations, Rationing, and Food Control* (London, 1918); L. Margaret Barnett, *British Food Policy during the First World War* (London, 1985); F. Coller, *A State Trading Adventure* (Oxford, 1925); Consumers' Council Archive, Marion Phillips Papers, Manchester Labour History Archive, CP 94/3: *Report on the Constitution and Work of the Consumers' Council*; R. A. Bayliss, 'The Consumers' Council, 1918–1921', *Jl Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, iii (1979); Frank Trentmann, 'Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship in Britain, *c.*1903–51', in Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2001).

1930s, and in the attempts to recreate a national consumer council.[16]

The second class of good is that at the opposite end of the critic's spectrum — the expensive luxury items so parodied in the eighteenth century. As with necessities, luxuries have enjoyed a similar perpetual politicization. If luxury as an all-embracing concept was never so relevant after the eighteenth century, goods and leisure activities noted for their novelty or excitement were to be similarly criticized in the Victorian period for their enervating effect upon the spirit, their ability to reduce control of the self and subsequently their threat to the social order. Included here are the various psychoactive substances that have found their adherents and detractors — coffee, tobacco, alcohol, and the range of drugs which have only relatively recently been legislated against — but also many rural pastimes whose enjoyment was said to threaten the civility of urban life, especially the 'cruel sports' of the rural poor banned in 1825.[17] Included within this category of material and psychic luxury are new commodities and leisure activities that have created so-called 'moral panics': cheap mass-produced fiction, cinema-going, dancing, spectator sport, etc. These 'respectable fears' have increasingly been subjected to a cross-professional medico-political critique as former moral agendas have become hidden beneath an all-embracing concern for the healthy lifestyle.[18] The threat of luxury is therefore no longer one of material possession seemingly breaking down external indicators of social hierarchy, but is one of an inward loss of control of the self which in turn threatens social stability through the contravention of societal and cultural norms.

[16] Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), MAF 194/815: Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: Marketing Divisions: Registered Files, 1937–1965, *Consumers' Councils for England and Wales, Scotland and Great Britain: History and Development of Pre-War Food Council*; R. A. Bayliss, 'The Consumers' Councils Bills, 1929–1939', *Jl Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, iv (1980).

[17] James Walvin, *Leisure and Society, 1830–1950* (London, 1978); Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Social Control* (London, 1978); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c.1780–c.1880* (London, 1980); Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–1872*, 2nd edn (Keele, 1994); Matthew Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture, 1800–2000* (Manchester, 2000); Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London, 1992).

[18] See, for instance, the recent newspaper hysteria in Britain over the health consequences of mobile phone use, most reports of which made their conclusions before any substantial research had been conducted. The term 'respectable fears' is borrowed from Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (Basingstoke, 1983).

A third category might be labelled semi-luxuries, or perhaps what Alfred Marshall called 'comforts'. For Maxine Berg, semi-luxuries in the eighteenth century were those which had appeared formerly as luxuries but had been 'imitated' by British manufacturers for a wider market — printed calicoes, light furnishings, ceramics and glass, clocks and watches, and countless decorative objects.[19] In the nineteenth century, Marshall's comforts included goods such as tobacco and alcohol (in moderation) and fashionable dress, which he also termed 'conventional necessities'.[20] For the comforts of the twentieth century, one can point to the consumer durables usually associated with mass market affluence — refrigerators, cookers, electrical appliances, stereos — goods which have largely broken down the boundary between luxury and necessity and which have mostly escaped moral censure, either because they have been consumed within the institution of the domestic sphere or because they have been depoliticized through commercial imagery. They are the goods that have been the focus of modern 'consumerism' across Western Europe and North America, defined here according to its original meaning: that is, the actions of organized consumers seeking to protect themselves through either individual empowerment or collective political action. The goods have appeared in the pages of the UK Consumers' Association's *Which?*, the US Consumers' Union's *Consumer Reports*, and all the other magazines of European consumer organizations essentially based on the value-for-money, comparative testing model: *Forbruker-Rapporten*, *Consumentengids*, *Taenk*, *Der Test*, *Test Achats*, and *Que Choisir?*[21] They are the goods which have been crucial in shaping the social and political environment of the latter half of the twentieth century. Their consumption, if conducted rationally and according to a particular ethic of seemingly non-hedonistic consumption, is now seen as central to modern notions of citizenship and the good life. It is the consumption of these goods which inverts Mandeville's paradox, making private consumption a virtue of modern living and the basis by which individuals have increasingly engaged with the perceived vices of the public sphere.

[19] Maxine Berg, 'New Commodities, Luxuries and their Consumers in 18th Century England', in Berg and Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and Luxury*.

[20] Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 67, 70.

[21] Peter Goldman, 'Competition: A Consumer Approach', 7 Mar. 1973, in Consumers' Association Archive, London (hereafter CA) 27: Internal Documents.

II

PRIVATE VIRTUE: THE RISE OF THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND THE FABLE OF THE SHEEP

Whereas historians of the eighteenth-century consumer society must look to the debates over luxury and the loose associations of private individuals within the bourgeois public sphere to understand Mandeville's paradox better, historians of the twentieth century must examine the range of voluntary organizations which have increasingly fallen within the nexus of the expanding modern state. The most appropriate organization to highlight the inverted Mandevillian paradox in Britain is the Consumers' Association (CA). It was set up in 1956, following an idea conceived by Dorothy Goodman, a young American graduate of LSE who had recently married Raymond Goodman, Director of Political and Economic Planning from 1946 to 1953. Frustrated at the difficulties in obtaining the appropriate information to help purchase the items necessary to set up a new home, she prepared, with Michael Young and a group of other young professionals, a dummy comparative testing magazine, modelled on those already in existence in Sweden and the United States. Following the Goodmans' posting to the International Bank in Washington, the project was left with Young, who made a garage at his Bethnal Green Institute for Community Studies available for use as a first office. With a donation of £3,000 from Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst's Dartington Hall Trust, with which Young had been associated since he attended the Elmhirsts' progressive school in Devon in the 1920s, the CA was able to organize itself formally on 18 March 1957, in direct imitation of the US Consumers' Union and the Swedish Institute for Consumer Research. The first edition of *Which?* was published on 7 October 1957.[22]

Because of the public prominence of Young and his fellow CA Council members, and because of the interest in a project many

[22] CA 30: Consumers' Association Annual Reports, *First Annual Report, 1957–1958*, 2. The above narrative is taken largely from Eirlys Roberts, *Consumers* (London, 1966), 76–81; Joyce Epstein, *The Early Days of Consumers' Association: Interviews with CA's Founders and Those Who Carried on their Work* (London, 1989). For general histories of the CA, see D. A. Aaker and G. S. Day (eds.), *Consumerism: Search for the Consumer Interest*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke, 1978); Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and its Fragmentation* (London, 1995); John Winward, 'The Organised Consumer and Consumer Information Co-operatives', in Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley and Nicholas Abercrombie (eds.), *The Authority of the Consumer* (London, 1994).

thought would collapse under the pressure of the law of British libel which made it comparatively easy to bring actions for defamation of goods, the immediate attention from the newspapers was considerable. The storm of publicity that greeted the CA's initial press conference undoubtedly contributed to the organization's immediate success, though the membership figures testify to widespread public demand for more information about an increasingly complex and, what was perceived to be, manipulative marketplace. By the end of its first year, the CA had received free publicity in over 300 publications and had 47,000 members paying an annual subscription of ten shillings. By the end of March 1961, there were already a quarter of a million members, and over half a million by the beginning of the 1970s. By 1987, membership figures would peak at just over one million.[23] This was undoubtedly a social movement, but one whose principal motivating ideas are difficult to ascertain.

The stated aim of the CA was to provide, as far as possible, objective assessments of consumer durables, to report on these to its members, and to highlight one brand that it considered the 'best buy': in short, to improve the individual shopper's ability to make value-for-money purchasing decisions. Beyond this, its political campaigning was limited — in 1963 the issues upon which it focused amounted to a call for greater extension of shop and licensing hours, the introduction of the metric system, the establishment of informative labelling, a change in the rule of the road, and further research 'to find out what consumers want'.[24] This was to be expected since the only thing that provided some coherence to its membership was their inclusion within the middle class: 'An analysis of the first 10,000 members showed that most were middle class, professional people, many of them men, and with a high proportion doctors, dentists, engineers, university and technical college lecturers, and so on'.[25] Members tended to be readers of the *Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Observer*, *Spectator*, and *Economist*; by contrast, reports on the activities of the CA in the pages of the *Daily Mirror* brought few, if any, new members. According to a 1960 survey, 49 per cent of members

[23] CA 30: *First Annual Report, 1957–1958*, 2; *Third Annual Report, 1960–1961*, 5; Consumers' Association, *Thirty Years of 'Which?', 1957–1987* (London, 1987).
[24] CA 30: *Seventh Annual Report, 1962–1963*, 3.
[25] CA 27: Eirlys Roberts, 'Consumer Protection in Foodstuffs' (speech delivered in the Food and Nutrition Section at the Health Congress, 1 May 1959).

were 'professional' (with annual incomes over £1,000), 40 per cent were 'lower professional' or junior managerial, leaving just 7 per cent from the skilled or semi-skilled working class.[26] Despite occasional efforts over successive decades to reach consumers on lower incomes, the membership has remained stubbornly middle-class: an October 2000 study still found that '*Which?* subscribers are not representative of the population generally', being 'more likely to be older, on higher incomes and in social grades AB'.[27]

But the CA was never intended to be primarily political, and its success has rested on its ability to bring consumers from a diverse range of backgrounds into one organization. The initial active members of the original British Association of Consumers in 1956 included engineers, solicitors, industrialists, civil servants, economists, and politicians attached to all the main political parties, plus members of bodies such as the British Productivity Council, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, and Political and Economic Planning.[28] All were concerned with national and economic affairs, and shared a belief that industrial recovery could be aided by consumers who would pressurize British firms into producing higher-quality goods that would then improve the export drive.[29] Young ensured that their diverse backgrounds were all represented on the CA Council, despite the slight bias towards the liberal left that naturally arose from his own personal contacts.[30]

What, then, motivated these original activists within the CA, and why did such an organization emerge so successfully in the latter half of the 1950s? First, an aesthetic reaction against the perceived homogenizing tendencies of the mass market links the events of the 1950s with late nineteenth-century Ruskinian and Morrisian organizations such as the National Trust, the

[26] The remaining 4 per cent were categorized as 'other': see CA 27, 'Who Reads *Which?*', article for *New Society*, final copy, 26 Oct. 1962.

[27] Consumer Intelligence Unit (CIU), *Profile of Subscribers*, Oct. 2000, internal CA document.

[28] CA 27: *European Consumer Organisations: A Digest of their Work* (1956); Christopher Beauchamp, 'Consumer Interest and Public Interest' (Univ. of Cambridge M.Phil. thesis, 2000), 39.

[29] Roberts, *Consumers*, 74, 78. The National Council of Women had already put forward this idea in 1956: see CA 27: National Council of Women, *Conference on Consumer Protection*, Apr. 1956; PRO, BT 258/879: Committee on Consumer Protection: Committee Papers, CCP 91: National Council of Women, Home Economics Sectional Committee, *Evidence to Molony Committee*; CA 27: Eirlys Roberts, *Cool Customers*, 9 Dec. 1963, 10.

[30] CA 30: *First Annual Report, 1957–1958*, 2.

Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising.[31] This critique remained a constant throughout the first half of the twentieth century, in the writings of figures as diverse as George Orwell, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, and in the Cambridge literary circle of F. R. and Queenie Leavis and Denys Thompson.[32] J. B. Priestley's and Jacquetta Hawkes's *Journey down a Rainbow*, with its characterization of 'admass' society, and the liberal-left American critiques of advertising — especially Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* — form an important backdrop to the modern consumer movement.[33] As if to confirm this link, the voluntary groups who came together in the Advertising Inquiry Committee entitled their magazine *Scrutiny*, a coincidental reference to Leavis's earlier literary periodical which had frequently carried articles condemning the mass market.[34]

Concern for the formal representation of the consumer interest had also been developing since the Consumers' Council of the First World War. Despite the attempts to incorporate consumers into the official public sphere in the Food Council and the Agricultural Marketing Boards, the consumer did not really enter the forefront of government policy until the Second World War. Then, as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has most recently demonstrated, women in their thousands were mobilized to implement and advise on government rationing schemes and austerity

[31] G. M. Trevelyan, *Must England's Beauty Perish? A Plea on Behalf of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty* (London, 1929); Merlin Waterson, *The National Trust: The First Hundred Years* (London, 1994); *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Briggs, 14.

[32] F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge, 1930); Denys Thompson, *Voice of Civilization: An Enquiry into Advertising* (London, 1943). More generally, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London, 1992); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; London, 1973); D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1994); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore, 1985).

[33] J. B. Priestley and Jacquetta Hopkins Hawkes, *Journey down a Rainbow* (London, 1955); Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957; Harmondsworth, 1960).

[34] PRO, BT 258/879: Committee on Consumer Protection: Committee Papers, CCP 168: Advertising Inquiry Committee, *Representations to the Committee on Consumer Protection*; Consumer Council, *Information for Consumer Education* (London, 1965), 42. I have not been able to find out whether the use of the title *Scrutiny* was deliberate or purely coincidental.

measures.[35] The effects of such an official concern for consumption were profound and lasting. Labour women in the 1950s such as Elaine Burton looked back affectionately to the certainties found in the Utility Scheme, which laid down guarantees of minimum quality for a selected range of consumer goods.[36] Members of largely middle-class women's groups, such as the Women's Institute, the Townswomen's Guilds, the British Housewives' League and the Women's Voluntary Service, increasingly pressed for consumer issues and for the concerns of the housewife to be addressed in national political debate. Arguably, the failure of the post-war Labour Government to attend to the needs of consumers resulted in their electoral defeat, as the Conservatives pushed for the abandonment of austerity measures.[37] By the early 1950s, consumer issues were being addressed at all levels. John Hilton's radio broadcasts had dealt with the problems of everyday life during the War, and a John Hilton Bureau was created by the *News of the World* as an advice and complaints service for its readers.[38] Advice on shopping issues likewise appeared in most of the Sunday newspapers and consumer columnists such as Marghanita Laski, Leslie Adrian and Elizabeth Gundrey began to achieve public prominence.[39] In 1946, a conference of the National Council of Women called on the British Standards Institution (BSI) to turn its attention to standards in consumer goods.[40] Several women's organizations were immediately invited to form a committee at the BSI, though it was not until 1951 that a formal Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) began to advise regularly on quality standards and the operation of the Kitemark

[35] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford, 2000).

[36] Elaine Burton, *The Battle of the Consumer* (London, 1954).

[37] James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives: The British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop*, no. 38 (1994); Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Bread Rationing in Britain, July 1946–July 1948', *Twentieth Century Brit. Hist.*, iv (1993); Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Explaining the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and the Women's Vote, 1945–1964', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996).

[38] Edna Nixon, *John Hilton: The Story of his Life* (London, 1946).

[39] Roberts, *Consumers*, 74–5.

[40] BSI, 'The History of the Women's Advisory Committee of the British Standards Institution' (BSI unpubd MS, 1970s?); BSI Archive, Minutes of Consumer Committees, Technical Committee, OC/11, National Council of Women, Advisory Committee on Consumer Goods, *Minutes, 1946–1950*.

labelling scheme.[41] In 1955, the WAC was expanded into the Consumer Advisory Council (CAC), and in 1957 a *Shopper's Guide* was launched. This magazine, edited by Gundrey, tested different commercial products, though being a publication ultimately backed by industry it was open to criticisms of lack of independence, and it certainly never praised any one brand of good over another.[42]

Precedents in government control, together with increasing doubts about affluence and the expanding marketplace, provide the immediate backdrop to the formation of the CA. However, earlier attempts had been made to provide consumers with objective, well-researched and independent information. Political and Economic Planning (PEP), another organization set up with a grant from the Elmhirsts of Dartington, investigated the workings of the US Consumers' Union in the 1930s, gauging the extent to which a similar organization could be set up in Britain.[43] It was decided that the scheme was unworkable in practice, largely because of the belief that a massive emergency fund would have to be established in advance to cope with any potential libel suits brought by disgruntled manufacturers. But PEP continued to discuss the possibility of a consumer testing organization through into the 1940s when Michael Young became its Director. Once he moved over to the Labour Party Research Department in 1945, he took many of these consumerist concerns with him and was able to insert in the manifesto for the 1950 election a commitment to the creation of a government consumer advisory service: 'a square deal for consumers'.[44] Harold Wilson, then President

[41] PRO, BT 258/879: Committee on Consumer Protection: Committee Papers, CCP 12: Women's Advisory Committee, *Evidence for the Committee on Consumer Protection*; CCP 13: Consumer Advisory Committee, *Evidence for the Committee on Consumer Protection*; BSI, Minutes of Consumer Committees, OC/11, Women's Advisory Committee, *Minutes, 1951–1965*; BSI, *Fifty Years of British Standards, 1901–1951* (London, 1951); C. D. Woodward, *BSI: The Story of Standards* (London, 1972); BSI, *Standards and the Consumer: First Annual Report of the Advisory Council on Standards for Consumer Goods, 1955–1956* (London, 1956).

[42] *Shopper's Guide*, various issues, 1957–62; PRO, BT 258/879: CCP 13, covering note by Mitchelmore, Secretary to Committee on Consumer Protection.

[43] British Library of Political and Economic Science, LSE, London, Political and Economic Planning Archive, 12/164: Leonard K. Elmhirst Papers: *Consumer Research*; UP 10/3: Unprinted Papers: *PEP History: The Thirties*; John Pinder (ed.), *Fifty Years of Political and Economic Planning: Looking Forward, 1931–1981* (London, 1981); *Planning*, 18 July 1933, 'What the Consumer Wants'; *Planning*, 2 Jan. 1934, 'Knowledge from the Consumer End'.

[44] Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain* (London, 1949). Private correspondence between Young and author. See also Tony Smith and Alison Young, 'Politics and

(cont. on p. 235)

of the Board of Trade, was thus obliged to investigate the practicalities of a government-sponsored comparative testing organization, and Young was questioned by the government about PEP's earlier investigations.[45] With an annual budget of £1 million being proposed for a Consumer Advisory Centre, this was a daring extension of government intervention into individuals' day-to-day lives, and it was concluded that the government could not justify such expense, although issues of budgetary belt-tightening were also prominent.[46] The pressure for the incorporation of consumerist concerns within government came from the social-democratic or centre-right wing of the Labour Party, though such 'third way' approaches were as yet premature. Indeed, Labour Party consumer policy was perhaps better exemplified by the weak and ineffectual consumer councils created for each of the newly nationalized industries in the late 1940s.[47]

Concern for the consumer interest therefore emerged from across the political and social spectrum, and Young was keen to have all these interests represented in the first Council of the CA. That such a diverse group was able to come together within one organization was due, according to Eirlys Roberts (editor of *Which?*, and Research Director of the CA from 1958), to a shared commitment to rationality:

> All the group, whatever their politics or disciplines, were what would usually be called intellectual — that is to say, they felt at home only in a world in which they (and the people around them) at least believed that most of their decisions were rational. They found it uncomfortable that they (and other people) should be living blindly and irrationally in an

(n. 44 cont.)
Michael Young', in Geoff Dench, Tony Flower and Kate Gavron (eds.), *Young at Eighty: The Prolific Public Life of Michael Young* (Manchester, 1995). Young also contributed significantly to the 1945 manifesto which also paid attention to the consumer interest: Labour Party, *Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation* (London, 1945). See also J. F. Northcott, *Value for Money? The Case for a Consumers' Advisory Service* (London, 1953).

[45] PRO, PREM 11/1542: Prime Minister's Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1945–1951, *Proposals by Distribution and Marketing Committee that a Departmental Committee Be Set Up with the Idea of Creating Some Form of Consumer Advisory Service*; PRO, BT 258/352–5: Industries and Manufactories Department: Registered Files, *Consumer Protection Policy*.

[46] PRO, CAB 124/2749: Offices of the Minister of Reconstruction, Lord President of the Council and Minister for Science: Records, *Board of Trade Memorandum on Establishing a Consumer Advisory Centre, 1945–1951*.

[47] L. Freedman and G. Hemingway, *Nationalisation and the Consumer* (London, 1950); Consumer Council, *Consumer Consultative Machinery in the Nationalised Industries* (London, 1968); National Consumer Council, *Consumers and the Nationalised Industries* (London, 1976).

> important respect (buying goods and services) and that in this practical sphere they should be guided almost exclusively by appeals to their emotions (advertising). There are — they felt — spheres in which it is proper that emotion, and not reason, should operate — such as love and aesthetics — but that buying a refrigerator is not one of them. They felt they were in a confused and messy situation and the idea that it should be clarified, mapped and put in order by the presentation of facts about goods and services, appealed to them strongly.[48]

This was an attitude shared by many members of the CA. Frequent investigations into consumer attitudes have found that within the CA membership, 'individualism' is strong as an ideology, with the most appreciated reports in *Which?* being those that help the individual as buyer. Indeed, in 1978, a survey found that '*Which?* informants were inclined to be ascetic and puritanical. As value-seekers, they did not feel that covers needed to be visually arresting'.[49] Caspar Brook, first director of the CA, argued that the 'underlying philosophy' of *Which?* was 'to strengthen the individual consumer, rather than all consumers in the aggregate', creating what he called 'more discriminating consumers'.[50] The layout of *Which?* certainly confirms this ideology. Images used in the early editions of the magazine featured male scientific experts in white laboratory coats explaining the operation of electric kettles to middle-aged, middle-class housewives, who in turn demonstrated their rational empowerment through the firm grasp of their handbags and the look of serious-minded critical scrutiny across their faces.[51] Elsewhere, objects were pictured entirely on their own, stripped of the seemingly manipulative ephemera of commercial iconography, or they appeared again in the laboratory, withstanding (or otherwise) the rigorous scientific experimentation laid upon them.[52] Goods were valued not according to aesthetics, subjective preference or even enjoyment,

[48] Roberts, *Consumers*, 78–9.

[49] CA 14: Commissioned Research: Communication Research Ltd, *The Consumers' Association 'Which?' Report on a Qualitative Study of Subscribers' Attitudes* (London, 1978), para. 2.3; Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd, *Enquiry into 'Which?': A National Survey for Consumers' Association* (London, 1962).

[50] CA 27: Caspar Brook, *Research by Consumers* (London, 1961), 5, 14; Caspar Brook, 'Fresh Deal for Shoppers', *Observer*, 11 Feb. 1962; Caspar Brook, 'The Discriminating Consumer' (speech given to the British Institute of Management 14th National Conference, Nov. 1959).

[51] *Which?*, i, no. 1 (Autumn 1957), 4.

[52] *Ibid.*, 5.

but through the precise, technical language of scientific scrutiny: 'the more blobs the better', as one later critic would put it.[53]

The CA's ideology of consumerism utilized classic modernist motifs of chaos, confusion, whim, flux and the mass, upon which the rational, discriminating, idealized *Which?* reader would place order, objectivity and the strength of individual character.[54] The consumers of the modern marketplace were frequently referred to, not as bees as Mandeville put it in the eighteenth century, but as sheep, pigs or an untrained herd. This was an ethic of consumerism that fitted well with Fabian concerns about efficiency and rational direction. Colin Harbury spoke of the need for consumers to overcome their 'embarrassing ignorance', 'inability', 'short-sightedness' and 'wasteful, irrational' expenditure that one ought to expect of an 'Amazonian boy' were he to find himself in London. He argued that consumers needed to overcome the dictates of fashion, religion, national identity and custom to reach the 'enlightenment' of 'rational efficiency'.[55] Likewise, Conservatives urged the consumer to 'think' and spoke of the need to educate the individual consumer.[56] Robert Millar worried especially about the 'affluent sheep' whose every movement was directed by the manufacturers who, rather spectacularly, were able to control individuals' subconscious desires (over which consumers themselves had 'little or no control'): 'They are like sheep being joggled by sheepdogs. They run hither and thither, not knowing why and totally unaware of where they are going'.[57]

Out of this irrationalist zoo of unthinking and slavish adherence to commercial advertising, activists searched for a new type of consumer to lead the herd to a new society and marketplace. In this almost explicitly Nietzschean imagery, consumers put

[53] Alan Aldridge, 'The Construction of Rational Consumption in *Which?* Magazine: The More Blobs the Better', *Sociology*, xxviii (1994).

[54] On modernity in this context, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989); Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, 1983). On Britain, see Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (eds.), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford, 2001); Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London, 1999).

[55] C. D. Harbury, *Efficiency and the Consumer* (London, 1958), 2–5.

[56] Michael Baynes, *Advertising on Trial: The Case for the Consumer* (London, 1956), 18; Philip Goodhart *et al.*, *Choice: A Report on Consumer Protection* (London, 1961); Philip Goodhart, *A Nation of Consumers* (London, 1965).

[57] Robert Millar, *The Affluent Sheep: A Profile of the British Consumer* (London, 1963), 3.

their faith in a new breed of 'super-shopper', or perhaps *Überverbraucher* as he or she might more appropriately be termed. Political and Economic Planning re-entered the debate and called for a 'consumer enlightenment'.[58] Robert Millar asked, 'Who will be the shepherds?', and imagined 'two nations' of consumers emerging in a classic master–slave narrative: on the one hand the 'efficient', 'rational', 'scientific', 'objective', 'informed' and 'discriminating', motivated purely by a desire to obtain value for money; on the other, the 'fickle', 'ignorant', 'deluded' and 'illogical'.[59] Later, Robin Wight predicted that one day, after the advertising industry had wrought its 'self-destruction', the 'pigs' would 'refuse to be driven to market'.[60] From the ashes of the riots of 1968 would emerge the new consumer movement, ready to be shown a new direction: 'Will the British Ralph Nader please stand up?', Wight asked in 1972.[61] The answer to these questions varied according to the institution concerned. For the BSI, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), the CA and the Inner London Educational Authority, the super-shopper appeared in a series of educational cartoons in the 1970s as a hyperefficient and worldly auntie figure who guided the young and frivolous Suzi around the obstacles of modern commerce.[62] For those in the organized consumer movement, Michael Young appeared as the *Überverbraucher*, though his activities in countless other voluntary, official and academic spheres prevented any sustained involvement with the day-to-day concerns of consumerism.[63]

Consumption was thus becoming a private virtue, provided it was engaged in according to an ethic of rational critical discourse more traditionally associated with the idealized public sphere, but now directed to the world of commodity purchasing.[64] It was certainly an ethic which appealed to an increasing cohort of affluent consumers in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to the massive expansion in subscribers to *Which?*, thousands of consumers organized themselves in local consumer groups following

[58] *Planning*, 25 Apr. 1960, 'Consumer Protection and Enlightenment'.
[59] Millar, *Affluent Sheep*, 196.
[60] Robin Wight, *The Day the Pigs Refused To Be Driven to Market: Advertising and the Consumer Revolution* (London, 1972), p. xiii.
[61] *Ibid.*, 58.
[62] Office of Fair Trading (OFT), CA, BSI and Inner London Educational Authority, *Suzi and the Supershopper* (London, 1976).
[63] Dench, Flower and Gavron (eds.), *Young at Eighty*.
[64] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Oxford, 1992).

the establishment of the Oxford Consumers' Group in 1961. By 1963 there were nearly fifty groups and 5,000 members, with the movement peaking in 1967 when there were one hundred groups with a combined total membership of 18,000, all affiliated to the National Federation of Consumer Groups (NFCG).[65] Internationally, the CA combined with similarly organized bodies from the United States, Belgium and the Netherlands to form the International Organisation of Consumers' Unions (IOCU). With the spread of comparative-testing consumerism across the world, by 1987 there were 170 organizations affiliated to the IOCU from fifty countries, demonstrating the spread of the ideal beyond the affluent West.[66]

This ethic of consumption certainly resonates with the models of rationality within orthodox economics, and it is a type of consumerism that has been promoted by many political and industrial interest groups. The notion of the consumer as rational individual, no matter how efficient or adept at dealing with the perceived structural inequities in the relationship between the trader and the shopper, is one that was heavily promoted by the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection which reported in 1962, and which came to influence much consumer legislation in the 1960s and 1970s.[67] A direct result of the Molony Report was the creation of the Consumer Council in 1963 which existed on a limited budget until 1970. The Council sought to protect the consumer while at the same time promoting a notion of the consumer as individual who needed to be educated in order to improve his or her market efficiency.[68] Solutions to market failure were only rarely to involve direct government intervention; instead, consumers were to be taught to be able to identify abuse, fraud and deception so that little recourse would be needed to the Trade Descriptions Act of 1968. In the 1970s, the individualist ethic was promoted still further as the Office of Fair Trading,

[65] CA 27: D. H. Gorse, 'The Growth of Consumer Groups', *New Outlook: A Liberal Mag.*, xxi (July 1963); George Smith, *The Consumer Interest* (London, 1982), 291; H. Curtis and M. Sanderson, *A Review of the National Federation of Consumer Groups* (London, 1992).

[66] International Organisation of Consumers' Unions (IOCU), *Consumer Solidarity: For a Better World. Proceedings of the Twelfth IOCU World Congress* (London, 1987).

[67] *Final Report of the Committee on Consumer Protection*, Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P.P.), 1961–2 (Cmnd 1781), xii; Matthew Hilton, 'Consumer Politics in Post-War Britain', in Hilton and Daunton (eds.), *Politics of Consumption*.

[68] PRO, AJ 1/1–10: Consumer Council: *Minutes, 1963–1970*; AJ 2/1: Consumer Council: Papers: CC(63)1: *Terms of Reference*.

created in 1973, sought voluntary methods of market regulation over government intervention on behalf of the collective mass of consumers.[69] According to Jeremy Mitchell, the first phase of consumerism up to the 1970s aimed at more information, with protection as a secondary objective.[70] The Office of Fair Trading may have changed this image, since the Director-General was empowered to intervene directly to check trade abuses, but the consumer was still very much an economic and rational individual unit.

Here, then, we might end the narrative, having demonstrated the influences acting upon the consumerism of the CA and the potential consequences of the promotion of an individualist ethic of consumption. The CA's private virtues could easily be traced through to the neo-liberal market reforms of the 1980s whereby the Conservative Government's promotion of an economic ideal of free choice was made more socially and politically acceptable to a body of consumers taught for several decades to imagine themselves as rational, discriminating shoppers. Within this political framework, private virtues might well have become 'publick benefits', except that the politics of consumer society have remained as paradoxical as they ever were in the eighteenth century. As the second half of this essay will demonstrate, the private virtues of consumption also developed the means by which public vice has come to be criticized.

III

PUBLIC VICE: THE CONSUMERIST CRITIQUE OF CONSUMERISM AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF CONSUMPTION

From the very beginnings of the organized post-Second World War consumer movement, another strand of consumerism emerged distinct from the consumer as individual, purely economic agent, or simply shopper outlined above. Instead of the customer-as-citizen model, argued by Lizabeth Cohen to have

[69] Director-General of Fair Trading, *Annual Report, November 1973 – December 1974* (London, 1975); John Aspinall, 'Glossary of Organisations Active in Consumer Affairs', and Jim Humble, 'A New Initiative', both in Jeremy Mitchell (ed.), *Marketing and the Consumer Movement* (London, 1978); I. D. C. Ramsay, *Rationales for Intervention in the Marketplace* (London, 1984).

[70] Jeremy Mitchell, 'Management and the Consumer Movement', *Jl General Management*, iii (1976), 51.

come to prominence in the USA,[71] a more socially aware strand of consumerism began to incorporate the consumer into a wider notion of citizenship. This has its origins in the democratic socialist or social democratic wing of the Labour Party, best exemplified in the writings of Anthony Crosland, especially in his *The Future of Socialism* written in 1956.[72] Crosland's fellow traveller along this social revisionist route was Michael Young, who for some time had been concerned about the freedom and liberty of the individual within the efficient and necessary, but nevertheless centralizing and dehumanizing, tendencies of socialist state planning.[73] Such beliefs would later take Young away from the Labour Party with the formation of the Social Democratic Party, for which in 1982 he set up the Tawney Society, a political think tank that was intended to be to the SDP what the Fabian Society was to Labour.[74] But, in a 1960 pamphlet, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover*, Young marked his early despair with what he saw as Labour's blinkered vision of socialist planning, ignoring as it did the changes in society which, he argued, had produced a fundamental shift in people's outlook from one of production to one of consumption.[75] Anticipating by many years countless postmodernist critiques of consumerism, Young argued that 'class based on production is slowly giving way to status based on consumption as the centre of social gravity', and that 'politics will become less and less the politics of production and more and more the politics of consumption'.[76] If Labour failed to take account of this new interest of citizens, its policies would become increasingly irrelevant, and a new Consumers' Party would

[71] Lizabeth Cohen, 'Citizens and Consumers in the Century of Mass Consumption', in Hilton and Daunton (eds.), *Politics of Consumption.*

[72] C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956); David Reisman, *Anthony Crosland: The Mixed Economy* (Basingstoke, 1997); Michael Young, 'Anthony Crosland and Socialism', in Dick Leonard (ed.), *Crosland and New Labour* (Basingstoke, 1999); Kevin Jefferys, *Anthony Crosland: A New Biography* (London, 1999).

[73] Michael Young, *Small Man: Big World. A Discussion of Socialist Democracy* (London, 1949); Michael Young, *Labour's Plan for Plenty* (London, 1947).

[74] Dench, Flower and Gavron (eds.), *Young at Eighty*, 240.

[75] Michael Young, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover: A Discussion of the Possibility of a New Progressive Party* (London, 1960), 9.

[76] *Ibid.*, 11. On the importance of consumption to postmodernity, see J. Baudrillard, 'Consumer Society', in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge, 1988), 29–56; Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London, 1991); R. Bocock, *Consumption* (London, 1993).

emerge.[77] Crucially, however, Young perceived his consumers as liberal individuals who would free politics from the economic sectionalism that tied the Labour Party to the TUC and the Conservatives to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). His consumers would be progressive, socially aware and committed to their duties as well as their rights as citizens:

> A consumers' party might appear merely acquisitive and materialist. But it need not be so. A consumers' party could take the broad view, for it is as consumers that we look out upon a much larger and more varied scene than when we are at work. A consumers' party could be internationalist, for it is not as producers that we feel sympathy for Indian or Chinese peasants — rather the reverse since other producers are possible competitors. It is as consumers that we feel for them: they too are people, whose families are dying because they do not get enough to eat.[78]

Young's other social and political concerns would largely keep him out of the administration of the consumer movement in the 1960s, but the divisions between a narrow economic and a broader sociopolitical notion of consumerism increasingly became apparent within the Consumers' Association. Figures such as Caspar Brook and Jeremy Mitchell argued for a more limited understanding of consumerism. When Mitchell was about to become the Director of the National Consumer Council in 1977, although he acknowledged the need for government intervention and opposed a view of the consumer interest put forward by business that favoured unregulated free competition, he still foresaw a limited social role for the consumer that fell far short of citizenship.[79] Later, Rachel Waterhouse, Chair of the CA in the 1980s, admitted she was merely a 'professional consumer' concerned only with the day-to-day issues of commodity purchasing, watching the market 'like a hawk'. She hoped to prevent the word consumerism being applied to all areas of civil and political life — 'as consumer and citizen are not coincident' — and felt that the CA should not involve itself in such broad issues as inner city regeneration or the protection of the environment.[80] The alternative vision of Michael Young was advocated most forcefully in the CA by Eirlys Roberts. She never quite fully answered her own question — 'where does a consumer end and a citizen begin?' — but she

[77] Young's hope was that the Labour Party would, however, adopt a consumerist mentality: Paul Barker, 'Michael Young', *New Society*, 8 Aug. 1968.

[78] Young, *Chipped White Cups of Dover*, 19.

[79] Mitchell, 'Management and the Consumer Movement'.

[80] CA 27: Rachel Waterhouse, 'New Frontiers for Consumerism', *Jl Roy. Soc. Arts*, cxxxvi (June 1988), 467.

outlined a general political campaigning role for consumer organizations, which she urged 'to work for a fair deal for the public' as a whole and to protect the interests of more vulnerable consumers, such as women and the poor, whose interests she felt could never be entirely met by better information and comparative testing.[81]

These tensions within the CA, over whether to serve the consumer as individual through *Which?* or the consuming public at large through political campaigning, were only ever institutionally resolved in 1987 when a charitable trust, the Association for Consumer Research, was created to serve all consumers as the public interest, while the CA itself remained a commercial enterprise focusing on its comparative testing service for subscribers.[82] Before this, Peter Goldman, Director of the CA from 1964 to 1987 and a former Conservative parliamentary candidate,[83] steered a fine line between the two approaches. In a series of articles he reiterated the individualist model of consumerism and urged a conciliatory approach to business, but argued that, while the CA's primary function would always remain its comparative testing service for its subscribers, it must also remember its secondary purpose: to campaign for general changes in the law if it believed such action was in the interest of its members.[84] During the 1960s, although the CA consumerism did not 'develop a body of principles' since its members were 'much too busy with the immediate',[85] its single issue campaign tactics expanded. Here, one can see the emergence of 'public vice' as the CA sought not to offer an alternative to the market, but to offer a series of checks and balances whenever a particular issue appeared to demand it. For instance, the Research Institute for Consumer Affairs (RICA) was set up by the CA in 1961 as an independent charity to investigate consumer problems beyond obtaining immediate value for money. Its initial investigations included in-depth studies of general medical practice, estate agents, the

[81] CA 27: Eirlys Roberts, 'A Fair Deal for the Public', *Jl Roy. Soc. Arts*, cxxiv (Apr. 1976).

[82] Sarah Franks, 'Selling Consumer Protection: Competitive Strategies of the Consumers' Association, 1957 to 1990' (Univ. of Oxford M.Phil. thesis, 2000), 133.

[83] Peter Goldman, *Some Principles of Conservatism* (London, 1961).

[84] CA 27: M. Patrick, R. Chapman and R. Winsbury, 'Consumerism Searches for a New Direction', *Campaign*, 11 Dec. 1970; Peter Goldman, 'Competition: A Consumer Approach', *Campaign*, 7 Mar. 1973.

[85] CA 27: Peter Goldman, 'Consumerism — Art or Science?', *Jl Roy. Soc. Arts*, cxvii (Aug. 1969).

Co-operative Movement, town planning, safety concerns over children's toys and motor vehicles, and the specific problems of particular groups of consumers such as the elderly.[86] This expansion of the consumer interest into general social issues was continued by the CA, who commissioned various studies into consumer attitudes towards protection measures, and provided detailed evidence themselves to various government investigations such as the Crowther Committee on Consumer Credit in 1969.[87]

The most sustained effort at reaching groups of consumers usually unlikely to subscribe to *Which?* came with the CA's support for local consumer advice centres. Following successful experiments in Vienna and Berlin, the CA established its first centre in a busy shopping street in the racially and socially mixed Kentish Town in 1969. The aim was to create an informal atmosphere where 'pre-shopping counselling' and information would be given to the type of consumer 'most likely to be intimidated by official surroundings and formal procedures'.[88] The experiment proved a success and came to be regarded as a valuable social service, so much so that Camden Council took it over in 1972. Many other local authorities soon followed: in 1973 there were ten centres, by mid-1974 there were forty and, following the impetus provided by the reorganization of local government in 1974 and 1975 (Scotland), by 1979 there were two hundred consumer advice centres in all parts of the UK.[89]

The attitude of local government and consumer groups to advice centres in 1970 stood in sharp contrast to that of the

[86] Research Institute for Consumer Affairs (RICA), *Estate Agents: A Consumers' Assessment* (London, 1963); RICA, *General Practice: A Consumer Commentary* (London, 1963); RICA, *British Co-operatives: A Consumers' Movement?* (London, 1964); RICA, *Children's Toys: The Trade Assessed* (London, 1964); RICA, *Town Planning: The Consumers' Environment* (London, 1964); RICA, *Elderly Consumers: The Problem Assessed* (London, 1964); RICA, *Car Defects: A Consumer Investigation* (London, 1964).

[87] CA 14: *Reports by Other Bodies Commissioned by Consumers' Association*: Market Advisory Services Limited, *Market Research Proposal to Investigate Current Attitudes towards Consumer Protection with Special Reference to 'Which?'* (London, 1964); Public Attitude Surveys Ltd, *A Postal Survey Conducted among Subscribers to 'Which?' Magazine Concerning Attitudes to Resale Price Maintenance* (London, 1961); CA 31: *RICA Publication and CA Reports*: File — *Comments, Evidence and Submissions to Government Departments and Official Inquiries to 1985*.

[88] CA 27: 'The Development of Consumer Advice Centres in the UK' (1978), 6.

[89] *Ibid.*, 4; CA 27: 'The Need for Consumer Advice Centres' (1975); Smith, *Consumer Interest*, 14.

Conservative Government, which in that year dissolved the Consumer Council. The CA immediately realized that it now formed the largest and most effective outlet for the consumer voice and it consequently expanded its political campaigning role.[90] The Conservatives soon performed an about-turn in their consumer policy, appointing Geoffrey Howe as Minister for Consumer Affairs (within the Department of Trade and Industry) in 1972, and creating the Office of Fair Trading in 1973, both of which were direct responses to the public outcry that had greeted their earlier attitude to the Consumer Council. Adam Raphael, writing in the *Guardian*, claimed that Labour were angry not to have boarded 'this vote-winning bandwagon' earlier, but when they next came to power they certainly made amends.[91] The Conservatives still held on to a notion of the consumer as rational individual who only needed more information in order to rectify the imbalances of the market,[92] but the Labour Party responded directly to the more socially aware consumerism of the type that had supported the advice centres. After coming to power, they upgraded consumer representation in government by establishing a Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection in March 1974, the very act of which seemed to confirm that consumers had an important role to play in inflation policy, a position deliberately denied by the Conservatives.[93]

But the most significant development in social consumerism (as opposed to the economic consumerism promoted by the OFT) was the creation of the National Consumer Council (NCC) in 1975. The NCC has its immediate origins in a government White Paper of 1974 which explicitly stated that consumers had as much

[90] See examples of submissions to government committees in the 1970s and early 1980s in CA 31: File — *Submissions*.

[91] Quoted in Michael H. Winchup, *Consumer Legislation in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland: A Study Prepared for the EC Commission* (London, 1980), 7.

[92] This is perhaps best exemplified by the Conservative Party's first appointment to the position of Director-General of Fair Trading. John Methven had been a solicitor for Imperial Chemical Industries and subsequently became the Director of the Confederation of British Industries: *ibid.*, 10; *Dictionary of National Biography, 1971–1980*, 567.

[93] Ronald E. Wraith, *The Consumer Cause: A Short Account of its Organisation, Power and Importance* (London, 1976), 16; Smith, *Consumer Interest*; Leonard Tivey, 'Quasi-Government for Consumers', in Anthony Barker (ed.), *Quangos in Britain: Government and the Networks of Public Policy Making* (Basingstoke, 1982); Leonard Tivey, 'The Politics of the Consumer', in Richard Kimber and J. J. Richardson, *Pressure Groups in Britain: A Reader* (London, 1974); Central Office of Information, *Fair Trading and Consumer Protection in Britain* (London, 1976).

of a right to a say in state affairs as either the TUC or the Confederation of British Industry and, as such, should have a central agency serving their purposes. Unlike the earlier Consumer Council of 1963, the members of the NCC were to stand as direct representatives of the consumer movement, in recognition of organized consumerism's political legitimacy, and they were to act deliberately as a 'partisan body'. Crucially, the White Paper rejected the assumption of equality between buyer and seller that the OFT strove for, and insisted on the need for a body to speak for the 'inarticulate and disadvantaged', or those who were believed not to possess the full individual skills of rational liberal citizenship.[94] Michael Young's ideas were again influential in the drafting of the White Paper, and he in turn had increasingly become interested in the problems of poor consumers ever since the publication in the United States of David Caplovitz's *The Poor Pay More* in 1963.[95] The NCC, once established by a government grant-in-aid, was an organization with the independence, funds and agenda that matched Young's social democratic aims and he agreed to become its first Chair, the other members being nominated by professional consumer and women's groups, though space was created for increasingly professional and political voluntary sector workers, such as Chris Holmes of Shelter.[96]

The NCC was quick to set out its philosophy, much of which was encapsulated in its stress on education and information, two services said to constitute 'the fourth right of citizenship'.[97] If T. H. Marshall would have included these within the social rights of his third stage of citizenship (the first two being the civil rights of the liberty of the individual and the political rights of suffrage), Young believed them so crucial to the 'lifeblood of democratic government' that they warranted separate recognition, especially since 'without the right to education and information the other three sets of rights are liable to be hollow shams'.[98] But educa-

[94] Department of Prices and Consumer Protection, *National Consumers' Agency*, P.P., 1974 (Cmnd 5726), iii.

[95] David Caplovitz, *The Poor Pay More: Consumer Practices of Low-Income Families* (New York, 1963).

[96] NCC, *Annual Report, 1975–1976* (London, 1976), 7.

[97] NCC, *The Fourth Right of Citizenship: A Review of Local Advice Centres* (London, 1977).

[98] *Ibid.*, 6; Michael Young, 'Foreword', in Martin Minogue (ed.), *A Consumer's Guide to Local Government* (London, 1977); Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, 10.

tion and information did not mean only the ability to assess individually the relative merits of various consumer durables by utilizing the skills of the super-shopper, it also meant overcoming 'consumer detriment' (that is, the structural inequalities which forced the poor to pay more for their goods, either through ignorance of market opportunities or the inability to buy in bulk or budget effectively on a low weekly wage).[99] It is in the suggested solutions to the problems of consumer detriment that the NCC's version of consumerism becomes most apparent. It proposed a number of self-help voluntary measures, such as the formation of bulk-buying clubs, credit unions and housing co-operatives in order to obtain greater value for money, but it also proposed that the state should become more involved in consumer decisions. Rather than expecting the consumer to seek out information, the state, through agencies such as Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Consumer Advice Centres, legal advice centres, welfare rights agencies, etc., should work to ensure that information reached the disenfranchised consumer. The very first *Annual Report* of the NCC explicitly stated that consumerism extended beyond goods and services and related to the whole field of government activity.[100] The state was urged to exercise its own power, providing capital equipment for poor consumers, ending flat-rate tariffs within the nationalized industries and freeing up resources for housing provision when over-cautious building societies were unwilling to lend to certain classes of consumer.[101] And consumers were to have as much of a say in the running of the country as employers and trade unionists. This principle was embodied in the appointment of Young as first chair of the NCC, since he was also a member of the National Economic Development Council; the government expected him to act as a powerful consumer advocate in the meetings of the latter body.[102]

This move to incorporate the consumer into the official processes of state activity was continued and expanded upon once Michael Shanks succeeded Young at the NCC. Shanks shared with Young a dislike for the institutions of class and privilege

[99] Frances Williams, 'Introduction', in Frances Williams (ed.), *Why the Poor Pay More* (London, 1977), 2. On 'consumer detriment', see also Caplovitz, *Poor Pay More*; David Piachaud, *Do the Poor Pay More?* (London, 1974); NCC, *For Richer, For Poorer* (London, 1975); NCC, *Annual Report, 1977–1978* (London, 1978), 19.

[100] NCC, *Annual Report, 1975–1976*, 9.

[101] Williams (ed.), *Why the Poor Pay More*, 237.

[102] Roy Hattersley, 'Foreword', in NCC, *Annual Report, 1976–1977* (London, 1977).

that made Britain 'stagnant', and was committed to solving national economic problems through a concurrent consideration of social problems.[103] Strongly opposed to authoritarian or communist control of industry, he likewise criticized the potentially 'lethal' social and economic consequences of a narrow monetarist policy. His third-way solution was for a 'stakeholder' society, a 'Rational Society' in which the straitjacket of the 1970s corporate state would be loosened as groups other than trade unions and employers' organizations would sign a new 'social contract' with the state. It was a project that was distinctly Habermasian, as he rejected government based on the negotiation of organized private interests ('the conflict of competing groups'), and supported instead 'a consensus based on rational discussion and debate'. Such a reappraisal of state and society was crucial in this 'twilight of dying ideologies', where efforts to forge social cohesion were necessary if Britain was to 'survive the death of ideology and the vacuum of religious faith'.[104] The NCC offered a means to construct this new society, since the consumer interest was 'not a narrow or sectional one' and could, theoretically, provide the basis for a new engaged citizenship:

> As consumers we have no special expertise to contribute, no bargaining power to exert, no special interests to defend, no political axe to grind. Our sole advantage is that we look at policies from the consumer's point of view — and we are all, in part, consumers. We do not of course expect everyone to agree with everything we say — the views we put forward are the National Consumer Council's and, formally at least, ours alone. But they are views which stand free of sectional interest or political bias. We are partisan only for the general interest of everyone as consumers.[105]

Shanks expected the NCC to have a central say in all aspects of national life. In 1979, the NCC followed up their discussion of inflation policy set out in *Real Money, Real Choice* (1978) with an outline of the relationship between *The Consumer and the State* which looked 'through consumers' eyes at the structure and problems of the public sector, of public spending and taxation' — a study of 'economic policy as if consumers mattered'.[106] Now

[103] Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society: A Warning* (Harmondsworth, 1961).

[104] Michael Shanks, *What's Wrong with the Modern World? Agenda for a New Society* (London, 1978), 157–9.

[105] Michael Shanks, 'Foreword', in NCC, *Real Money, Real Choice: Consumer Priorities in Economic Policy* (London, 1978), p. ix.

[106] NCC, *The Consumer and the State. Getting Value for Public Money: Summary* (London, 1979), 1. Shanks's comment here alludes to the quotation which was also the subtitle of E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London, 1973).

consumerism was defined as a concept which could include proposals attacking inflation and unemployment, encouraging competition in a mixed economy, allocating public resources to measures designed to strengthen the economy, and ensuring the maximum degree of participation by all the interests concerned, consumers as well as producers: 'the concept of the consumer as an atomic, self-seeking individual out to maximize his own individual well-being no longer corresponds to the facts. Consumerism is an integral part of society, with broad social objectives and a growing international framework'.[107]

How such principles worked out in practice was frequently through a criticism of public vice. While the market was taken as a given, various weaknesses in its operation were identified. This was not done according to a strong ideological framework that governed political action, such as in the relationship between socialist thought and the politics of production, but through a focus on specific issues which it was felt needed reform. The backdrop to public vice, therefore, is a notion of liberal citizenship common to many 'third way' political agendas throughout the twentieth century. An informed body of consumers and other sociopolitical subjects, acting individually, in voluntary associations and private bodies, and through the institutions of the state, has come to critique various instances of market and official sector 'failure', where certain consumers have been identified in an unequal relationship with other agents, whether businesses, government departments or social services. Public vice manifests itself not as a theoretical critique of government and the market, but as a series of single-issue political campaigns. Coherence to the critique of vice comes less through general principles and more in the commitment to the establishment of campaigning networks consisting of different groups variously interested in specific subjects. Understanding the consumerist critique of vice, then, must come through an analysis of the campaigns, research strategies and agendas embarked upon, whether the problem is one of misleading advertising, the protection of minority interests, the defence of active citizenship or the holding to account of public institutions.

One such arena which became the focus for numerous consumerist pressure politics was the public sector. For instance, the

[107] Michael Shanks, *The Consumer in Europe* (Brussels, 1979), 14.

consumer consultative machinery within the nationalized industries was criticized for providing a weak consumer voice, and a language of consumerism was brought to areas of education, welfare, health and housing as a means of liberating the individual.[108] Raymond Williams was one of the first academic figures on the Left to complain of the spread of consumerist discourses within areas traditionally seen as beyond the rhetoric of the market, but it must be made clear that the NCC, as the principal agent for this development in Britain, did not employ such a language in order to impose a narrow, individualist, choice-based model upon the public sector: indeed, their definition of the consumer conflicted with that formulated by 'manufacturers and their agents'.[109] To provide just a few examples of this important development, means-tested benefits were regarded by the NCC as demeaning and a force for social division, exclusion and alienation. Labelling benefits claimants as consumers placed an onus on the welfare services to respect the rights of its citizens.[110] This is no better illustrated than in the NCC's ongoing critique of council house tenancy agreements. Rigid rent payment schemes often hurt disadvantaged consumers and a multitude of petty-minded and overbearing local authority clauses (for example, that North Dorset tenants use their baths only for the purposes intended, that Hull tenants 'see that the Water Closet is kept clean', and that others must not 'store more than a specific amount of petrol in the garage' or 'overcrowd [an] elderly person's flat with furniture') reflected a bureaucratic paternalism that, in the long run, served the interests of neither the consumer nor the local authority.[111] Beyond government activity, the NCC also provided an indirect critique of the marketplace. Most significantly, from 1978 the NCC recognized the problems in obtaining credit and has subsequently devoted much of its efforts to supporting self-help credit unions. The NCC provided the secretariat to the Credit Union Steering Groups and was influential in the passing

[108] NCC, *Consumers and the Nationalised Industries* (London, 1976); NCC, *Paying for Fuel* (London, 1976); R. Winfield, *Public Transport Planning: The End of an Era* (Cardiff, 1982).

[109] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1976), 69–70, 'Consumer'.

[110] NCC, *Means Tested Benefits* (London, 1976).

[111] NCC, *Tenancy Agreements between Councils and their Tenants* (London, 1976); NCC, *Soonest Mended: A Review of the Repair, Maintenance and Improvement of Council Housing* (London, 1979); NCC, *Cracking Up: Building Faults in Council Homes: Proposals for a New Deal* (London, 1982).

of the Credit Unions Act of 1979.[112] The NCC, therefore, while owing much to the consumerism of the 1950s and 1960s, extended the model of individual rationality to coincide with notions of citizenship. For instance, on education, the NCC wrote:

> We consider that the aim of consumer education, for both sexes, should not simply be to create a race of super-shoppers. Among other things, it should help to develop skills and resourcefulness, the ability to solve problems, and it should help people to move on from an initial responsibility to self and family towards a wider social responsibility to the community.[113]

Such an extension of consumerism brought about an almost inevitable backlash from industry, which argued that the NCC ought to restrict itself to 'true' consumer issues, 'such as the meat content of sausages'.[114] The election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in 1979 saw an immediate reversal in policy. The nearly £4 million that was being spent annually by central government on local Consumer Advice Centres was cut and the NCC was slowly brought round to a less radical agenda.[115] New Council members were often appointed from industry rather than the organized consumer movement, and a more individualist, pro-choice, anti-legislation line was adopted. In the early 1980s, Shanks made certain conciliatory gestures to the Conservative Government, contradicting his earlier agenda by claiming that the purpose of the NCC was to 'help consumers *as individuals*', and that the NCC could never hope to be 'the same kind of body as the CBI or TUC'.[116] Later, Chairs of the Council also emphasized a pro-competition message and the new spirit of the NCC seemed to be confirmed with the appointment as Chair of Michael Montague in 1984, a company director who made none of the general statements on the nature of consumerism that characterized the optimistic agendas of his predecessors Young and Shanks in the 1970s.[117]

By this stage, however, the consumer movement had developed not so much a coherent political ideology but a clear political practice which involved the formation of alliances and networks

[112] NCC, *Annual Report, 1978–1979* (London, 1979), 15; NCC, *Consumers and Credit* (London, 1980).
[113] NCC, *Annual Report, 1982–1983* (London, 1983), 32.
[114] NCC, *Annual Report, 1978–1979*, 2.
[115] Winchup, *Consumer Legislation*, 160.
[116] NCC, *Annual Report, 1982–1983*, 1.
[117] NCC, *Annual Report, 1983–1984* (London, 1984), 1, 41.

around which single-issue campaigns could be formulated by divergent groups. Young himself made attempts in the late 1970s and 1980s to reformulate consumerism in accordance with traditional co-operative principles, and he encouraged, through his Mutual Aid Centre, a number of self-help ventures in which consumers bypassed both market and state provision.[118] But perhaps his more significant initiative was the creation of the Consumer Congress when he first became Chair of the NCC. First meeting in 1976, the Congress was held to bring together as many groups and organizations as possible concerned with consumer affairs, so that they could exercise the same influence as the CBI or the TUC — the 'first and important step towards the creation of a genuinely national, democratically-controlled, consumer movement'.[119] Funded and supported by the NCC and the CA, the Congress included government officials, consumer activists, women's groups and nationalized industry consumer councils. A survey of the delegates to the Consumer Congress of 1985 demonstrates the breadth of this vision of the consumer. As well as representatives from bodies more obviously concerned with consumer affairs, the Congress Directory demonstrates the extent to which the voluntary and public sector embraced this new consumerism: delegates came from Age Concern, the Association for Housing Aid, the Association for Neighbourhood Councils, the Claimants and Unemployed Workers Union, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Department of Health and Social Security, Friends of the Earth, the Housing Aid Centre, Legal Aid, the Occupational Pension Advisory Service, the Ramblers' Association, the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Union Action Association.[120]

The Congress was regularly criticized for its very diversity, the sheer weight of contrasting interests producing 'bland and unexciting, even boring' Congress resolutions.[121] For instance,

[118] Michael Young and Marianne Rigge, *Mutual Aid in a Selfish Society: A Plea for Strengthening the Co-operative Movement* (London, 1979); Michael Young and Marianne Rigge, *Revolution from Within: Co-operatives and Co-operation in British Industry* (London, 1983); Marianne Rigge and Michael Young, *Building Societies and the Consumer* (London, 1981).

[119] NCC, *Annual Report, 1978–1979*, 31.

[120] CA 21: *Various Books and Papers: Consumer Congress Handbook 85* (London, 1985).

[121] *Ibid.*, 7.

when discussing privatization in 1986, a Congress workshop concluded that there were too many contrasting opinions to formulate a specific policy; the only resolution that could be passed was for the need for greater consumer representation in the privatization process.[122] The openness of the Congress enabled organizations such as the Advertising Standards Authority, the British Standards Institution and the Automobile Association to attend — groups which were elsewhere criticized as subject to industry control.[123] But more optimistic interpretations pointed to the ability of citizens and voluntary bodies to discuss and formulate policies on issues as diverse as housing, local authority services, legal aid, privatization, education and information, health care, social security, and the need for more credit unions.[124] The Congress provided one of a number of expanding forums at which organizations established citizenship rights through a consumerist rhetoric, as well as adding to the range of issues included within the consumer interest. One consequence of this was the greater use of consumerist rhetoric within the public sector, with both pro-market neo-liberal governments and socially aware voluntary groups contributing to the internal market. Within this, there was a lack of co-ordination of the single-issue critiques of public vice, which acted both as a weakness and as a strength. On the one hand, it enabled the meaning of the term 'the consumer' to be the site of political contestation, with certain groups seeking to remove the political and campaigning associations attached to the term 'consumerism'. For instance, pro-privatization, market reform interests maintained a definition that equated the consumer with the self-interested shopper, the atomized Thatcherite unit being all that remained after society had been abolished. But on the other, the critique of public vice was ever reinvigorated through the absence of a firm ideological commitment. Specific political issues could always be incorporated into a changing but always existing network of lobby groups, voluntary associations and committed individuals. In this ever-changing civic society, consumerism remained as contradictory as ever, alternately seeming to depoliticize and to radicalize consumer voices.

[122] CA 21: *Consumer Congress 86: 11th Annual Congress of the UK Consumer Movement* (London, 1986), 19.
[123] CA 21: *Consumer Congress 87: 12th Annual Congress of the UK Consumer Movement* (London, 1987), 13.
[124] CA 21: *Consumer Congress 86*, 4; *Consumer Congress 87*, 28–35.

Inverting Mandeville's paradox, then, the private virtues of the early CA's *Überverbraucher* were translated into the public vices of late twentieth-century consumerism, as an increasing number of groups followed the lead of the National Consumer Council to criticize both the public sector and the unequal role prescribed to the consumer in the modern market. Rational individualism, narrowly defined, is at the root of an economic consumerism found in the 1960s Consumer Council, the Office of Fair Trading, and in the market reforms of the 1980s. Broadly defined, however, social visions of consumerism have constructed the consumer as a private individual who joins with others in voluntary and state-sponsored bodies to create a new public sphere of consumption. This 'civil society' of consumers is no better seen than in the activities of the IOCU. Having originated as an organization to assist its constituent value-for-money, comparative-testing members, it has subsequently expanded to embrace a range of social and political concerns. At an early stage, the IOCU adopted as its principles the four 'rights' of consumers set out by J. F. Kennedy in 1962: the right to safety; the right to be informed; the right to choose; and the right to be heard. Together, these constitute a comparatively narrow vision of consumerism amenable to the organizing principles of bodies such as the OFT. But by the 1980s, four more rights had been added to the IOCU constitution: the right of redress; the right to consumer education; the right to a healthy environment; and, most significantly, the right to basic needs. These 'rights' expand on the individualist model of consumerism, though the final two also impose a set of duties on consumers which has seen IOCU activities extend into such topics as ozone layer depletion, nuclear safety, pesticides, drug policy, international agricultural policy, needs and welfare in the developing world, and the activities of transnational corporations.[125] While the growth of ethical consumerism and single-issue politics can be explained through a variety of phenomena, the media furore over the attacks against global capitalism and the publication of Naomi Klein's radical consumerist *No Logo* must count as their predecessors the consumerism of the largely middle-class organized consumer movement and the social democratic vision of its early leaders.[126] All

[125] IOCU, *Proceedings of the Twelfth IOCU World Congress: Consumer Solidarity. For a Better World* (London, 1987), appendix 2.
[126] Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London, 2000).

these movements rely on education and information — the benchmarks of Young's fourth stage of citizenship — as the means to provide citizenship for various consumers. In an 'informationalist' age of capitalism, as Manuel Castells puts it, consumer and voluntary groups have increasingly had to pool resources in order to become part of the 'network society', or else risk social and economic disenfranchisement.[127] Their policies have increasingly been to bring the socially excluded into the network through the use of a dominant consumerist rhetoric. As with the NCC and the public sector, such tactics apparently expand the role of the market, but at the same time have the potential to liberate certain consumers from its perceived social inequalities.

The implications of this history of organized, sociopolitical consumerism are threefold. First, it offers an account of consumer society not divorced from a political context. Scholarship has focused on the cultural and spectacular elements of consumer society, especially advertising and department stores, and has ignored the active efforts of consumers to defend their own interests.[128] While it is crucial to explain the relationships people have with goods in various social settings, it must be recognized that political concerns also emerge directly from people's knowledge of commodities.[129] Secondly, there is an account of consumer agency here which differs substantially from the assertions of negotiation, adaptation and contestation said to mark the individual consumer's interactions with the meanings of goods. There is much more to consumption than the processes of *bricolage* or moments of *poiësis* (active re-creation) favoured by de Certeau.[130]

[127] Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, i, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford, 1996).

[128] To cite just one example, it is significant that in the first attempt to offer a synthesis of 'consumerism' in world history, both co-operation and the types of organized consumer movements related in this article are not mentioned at all: Peter Stearns, *Consumerism: A World History* (London, 2001).

[129] A literature is emerging in the United States which recognizes the importance of the history of politicized consumers: see, for instance, Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, 1999); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern and Matthias Judt (eds.), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998).

[130] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (London, 1984); Mark Poster, 'The Question of Agency: Michel de Certeau and the History of Consumerism', *Diacritics* (Summer 1992). For overviews of the cultural studies literature which favours this analysis, see Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (Oxford, 1996); Peter Corrigan, *The Sociology of Consumption: An Introduction* (London, 1997); Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Oxford, 1997); Steven Miles, *Consumerism*

(cont. on p. 256)

In the assumption that is often made — that consumers' ability to resist meaning is in itself a form of highly politicized action — there is much to be learnt from Gramsci's phrase 'pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will', in that there is more a hope for rather than a delineation of agency.[131] Without wishing to deny the rich and insightful interpretations that can be made of all types of material culture, it is strange that scholars have hunted for consumer politics in the most obscure of places when literally millions of consumers have actually grouped themselves together in political organizations. Finally, and to reiterate, there is in the history of consumerism an identification of the contradictions of consumption. It is both liberating and restricting, positive and negative, broad and narrow, and it will continue to be so. Consumerist language was used to introduce an internal market into the health services which was criticized for actually failing to serve patient–consumer needs. Yet at the same time it enabled certain groups to find a voice, assert their rights and gain notable successes in terms of health provision.[132] Much of the language of consumerism mirrors the political rhetoric found in Giddens's *The Third Way*, and, indeed, it can be seen as an important forerunner of the Labour Party's focus on *Modern Markets: Confident Consumers*.[133] Both have been accused of presenting a politics of empty rhetoric, but consumerism at least is more graspable when seen in the context of its history of single-issue politics. Despite the general statements of consumer interests provided by the likes of Young and Shanks, consumerism's critique of public vice has always been more understandable through its sustained actions than its commitment to a particular ideology. Here, consumerism is both the symptom and the cause of changing market relations in twentieth-century Britain.

University of Birmingham *Matthew Hilton*

(n. 130 cont.)
as a Way of Life (London, 1998); Hugh Mackay (ed.), *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London, 1997); Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London, 1991).

[131] The phrase is taken from David Harvey's use of it to express the failure of the Left to produce a credible alternative to the market: David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh, 2000), 17.

[132] Christopher Bonell and Matthew Hilton, 'Durable Consumers: HIV Prevention as a Case Study for Use Groups in Health Services', *Voluntas* xiii (2002).

[133] Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge, 1998); Department of Trade and Industry, *Modern Markets: Confident Consumers. The Government's Consumer White Paper*, P.P., 1998–9 (Cm 4410), p. 1.